

Avoiding Fire in Lithuania

The last thing Soviet and Lithuanian leaders should want is a showdown over Lithuanian independence. But that's exactly where they seem to be heading, as Soviet planes buzz Vilnius, the capital, and the leaders there continue to insist that Lithuania is already a separate state.

The Bush Administration has sent just the right messages to both sides. It has reminded Moscow of the folly of using force, restated U.S. support for Lithuanian self-determination and avoided recognizing Lithuania's self-declared independence. It also has quietly encouraged Lithuanian-Americans to promote moderation in Vilnius.

But the test of wills now shaping up between President Gorbachev and President Landsbergis of Lithuania surely will turn ugly unless they can get to the bargaining table quickly. What they need is a fudgy diplomatic formula to obscure powerfully contradictory principles.

Mr. Gorbachev insists that Vilnius's declaration of independence is illegal, and that it can proceed toward independent status only in accord with Soviet law. In effect, he's saying he can't and won't

accept a fait accompli because it would embolden other secession-minded Soviet republics. Mr. Landsbergis correctly argues that Lithuania never freely agreed to incorporation in the U.S.S.R. and has now freely chosen to assert its independence.

Both sides seem to recognize the need to avoid a showdown. Mr. Gorbachev makes a demonstration of force, but isn't using it. Mr. Landsbergis refuses to be provoked by intimidation tactics, and says he's ready to work with Moscow.

Yet the situation grows more tense. Yesterday the Lithuanian Parliament passed bills to carry out independence, like a law defining national borders. The sizable Russian minority in Lithuania is mounting counter-independence rallies.

Meanwhile, the two sides can't figure out how to start bargaining, or even what to call such an encounter. Moscow wants "talks," as between a central government and a constituent state. Vilnius demands "negotiations," as between two sovereign nations. Given the stakes, it should not be beyond their ingenuity to devise the necessary smoke to avoid a catastrophic and unnecessary fire.